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Straight answers for emerging issues

Ten things we learned about writing
business content

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Ten things we learned about writing business content

Recommendations on how to structure and write proposals, reports, and other business documents.

It is arguably easier to find good [advice](#) on presenting than on writing, although most of us write more often than we present. Good business content – whether a proposal, a report, a paper or other type of deliverable – is clear, concise and factual: this article suggests 10 rules to write such content. As for our recommendations on [problem-solving](#) and [project management](#), these guidelines are based on our own experience and mistakes, so you will find both good and bad examples illustrating them.

1. It takes time

Even if you have considerable experience in the topic at hands, it will take time to organize, write and reference your thoughts, so plan ahead. In our own experience we found that most of us will often struggle with a particular aspect of this process, such as researching, structuring, charting, editing or text writing. Although practice greatly improves matters, writing business content is always a time consuming process: for instance, Exhibit 1 shows that it takes us on average 25 hours to write each one of our blog articles.

2. Build your story

I am sure that there are gifted writers

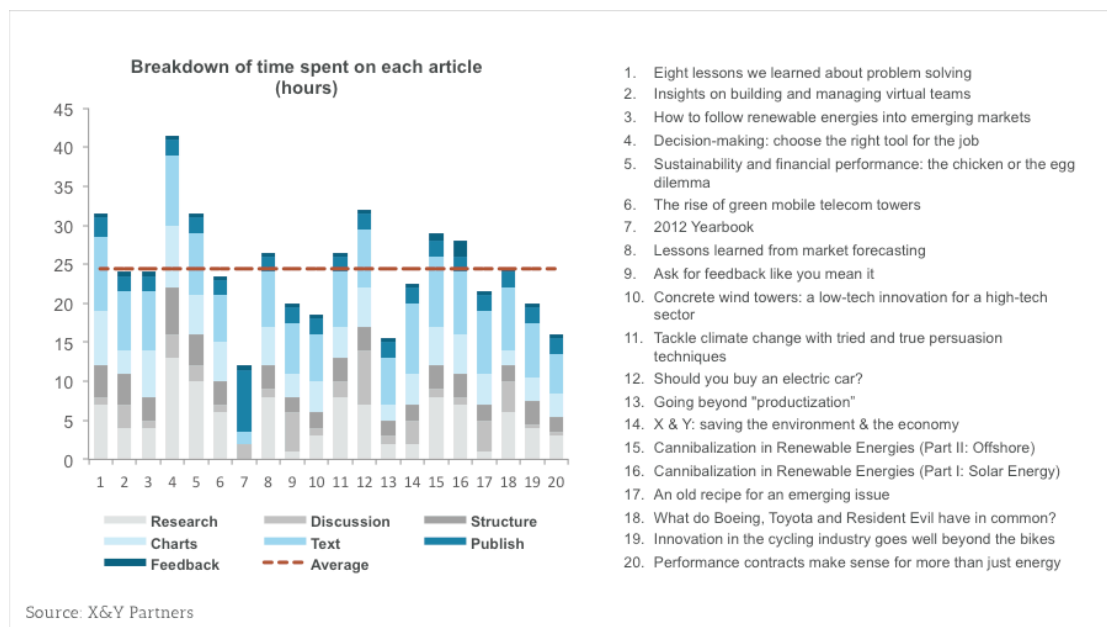
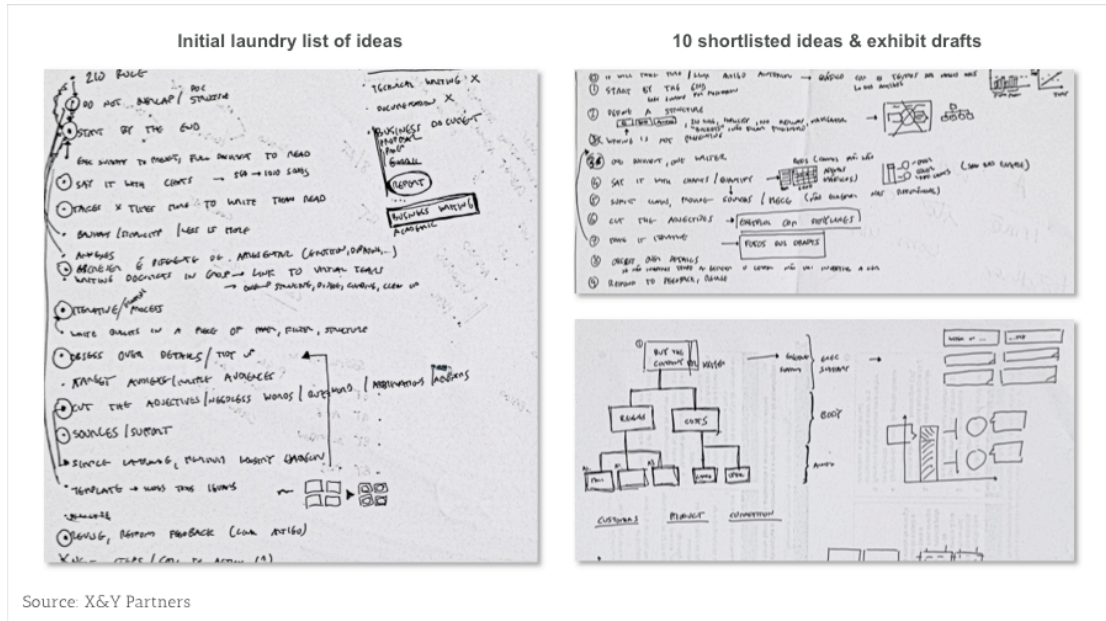


Exhibit 1 – Breakdown of the time we spent preparing the last 20 X&Y blog articles



Source: X&Y Partners

Exhibit 2 – The initial steps of drafting this article

that can write an entire document in a single iteration, but that is certainly not our case. We find that jotting down our ideas on a piece of paper before even opening up Word or PowerPoint helps us to organize our thoughts before committing to a specific story. For instance, Exhibit 2 shows the various iterations of this article: on the left, the initial laundry list of prospective recommendations; and on the right the shortlisted 10 rules and the supporting exhibits.

3. Once you have a story, tell it backwards

To maximize the number of readers that will assimilate your message, start by the most important thing: the conclusions. The rule, which is based

on the [Minto Pyramid Principle](#) and is contrary to common practice in academic essays and papers, can greatly decrease reading time. Exhibit 3 schematizes a Due Diligence report we recently performed: the key message of the report (that the target company should be bought at a specific price point) comes first, and is then justified by progressively more detailed levels of supporting information. This means that the reader, instead of being forced to read through the entire report, can stop reading it as soon as he or she is satisfied with the detail of evidence presented.

4. Support opinions and reference facts

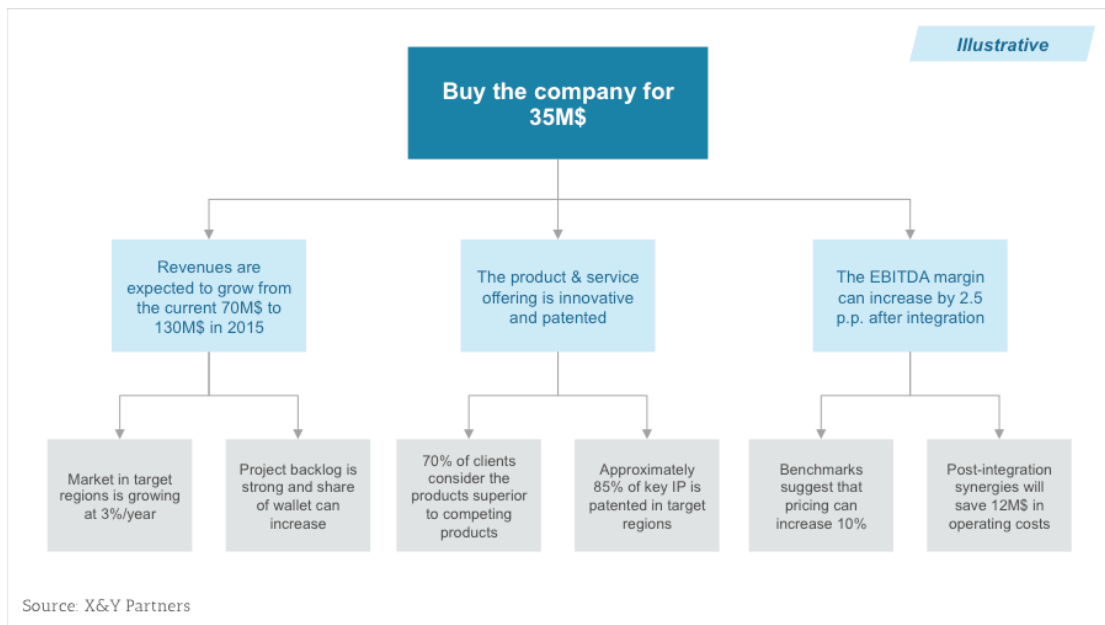


Exhibit 3 – An example of how to apply the Minto Pyramid Principle to communicate findings

There are two types of business contents: opinions and facts. Opinions (such as our recommendation about buying the company in Exhibit 3) need to be supported by facts (in this case, growing revenues, innovative products and potential to increase profitability). Facts need to be supported by

sources (in this case, market reports, customer interviews and financial data).

5. Great content needs a solid structure

A good business document is closer to a dictionary than it is to a novel: the

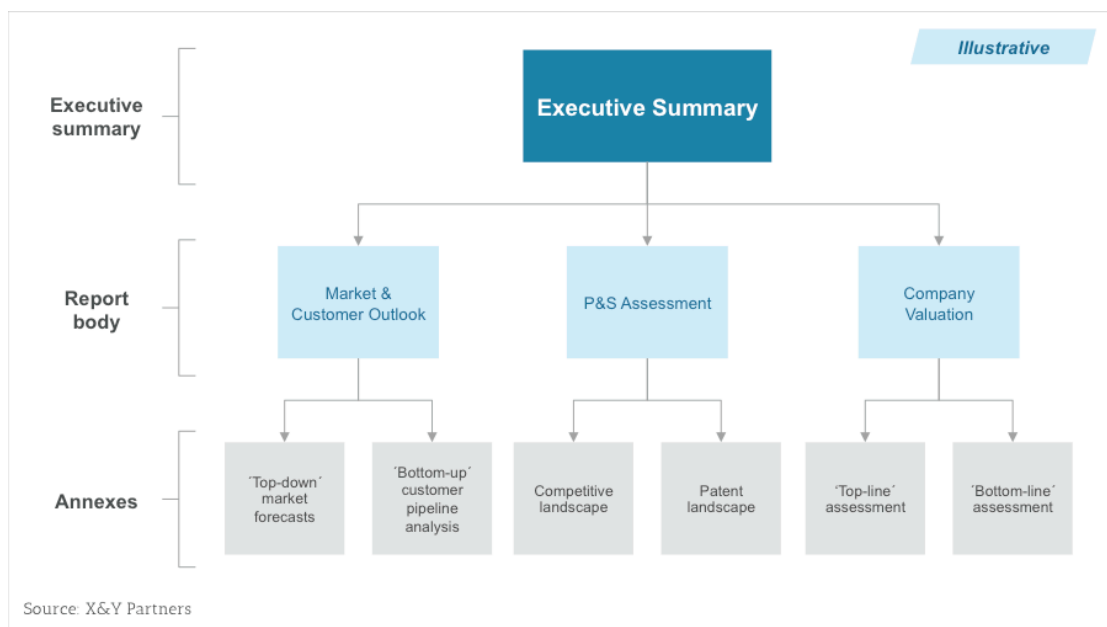


Exhibit 4 – An example of how to apply the Minto Pyramid Principle to structure a report

content needs to be precise and to-the-point, and it should be organized in such a way that the reader can quickly find out what he or she is looking for, and skip the rest.

If you followed rule #3 (Once you have a story, tell it backwards), it should be fairly straightforward to place your content in a practical structure, as illustrated by Exhibit 4. We usually organize our documents into three main sections: the Executive summary, which contains the conclusions and can be quickly converted into a presentation; the Report body, which breaks down the conclusions into supporting evidence; and the Annexes, which contain reference information.

Once you define the document structure, stick to it: there should be no misplaced, duplicated or unnecessary content. A good mnemonic is the '210' rule: conclusions are stated twice (once in the Executive summary and once in the Report body), relevant information is shown once (in the Report body or the Annexes), and irrelevant information is discarded.

6. One document, one writer

Documents with multiple authors are usually easy to spot, and not for good reasons: different formats, different writing styles and duplicated content

are three of the common pitfalls in this type of documents.

While there can be multiple contributors, there should only be one writer. However, this is often unfeasible when working as a team, so an alternative is to: agree on a structure for the document; assign individual chapters to team members; have one person merging, reviewing and homogenizing the entire document.

7. Say it with charts

The title of this rule is borrowed from [Gene Zelazny's](#) popular book on how to use charts effectively in visual presentations and written reports. Charts are a doubled-edged sword: when correctly used, they are the best way to convey quantitative information; when incorrectly used, they are confusing and misleading.

The best charts are often the simplest ones: decide on what message you want to convey and choose the most straightforward type of chart that can do it; use chart components (colors, scales, series order, labels, legends) to your advantage; and avoid adding visual elements that bring no additional information (e.g. 3D charts, clipart). Exhibit 5 illustrates some of these suggestions on a chart from one of our previous articles.

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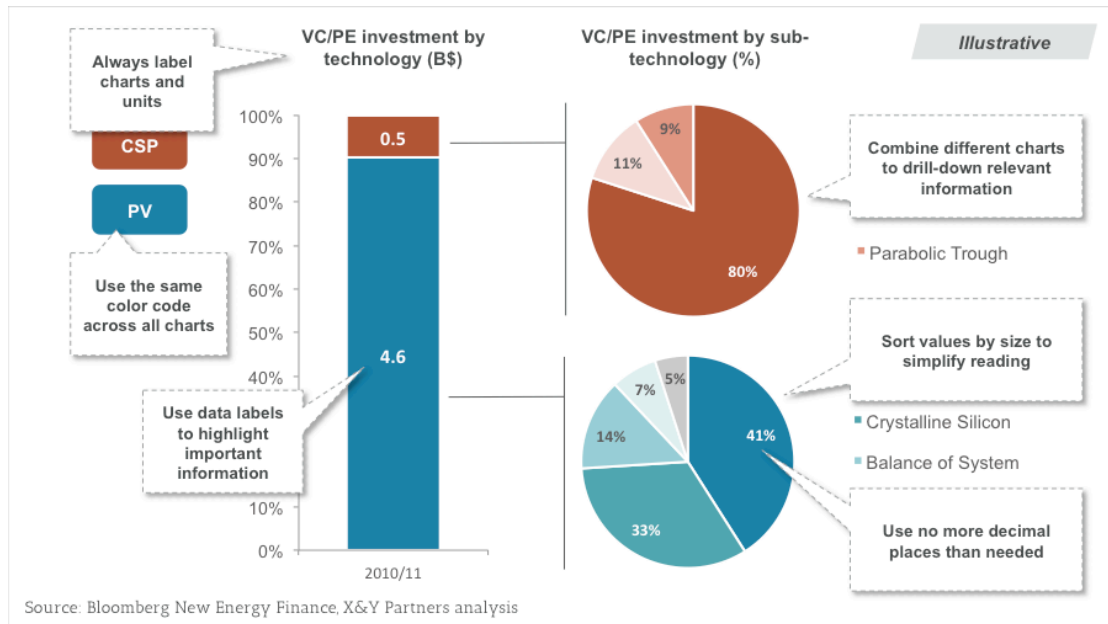


Exhibit 5 – Suggestions on how to design an effective chart

Visual representations can also be a very effective way of communicating qualitative information: Rules #3 (Once you have a story, tell it backwards) and #5 (Structure is as important as content) above are arguably much easier to grasp after looking at the

companion exhibits. Visual representations can also be a good way to highlight information that has become so commonplace it is often overlooked. For instance, we often use Exhibit 6 to underline our experience across multiple sectors and

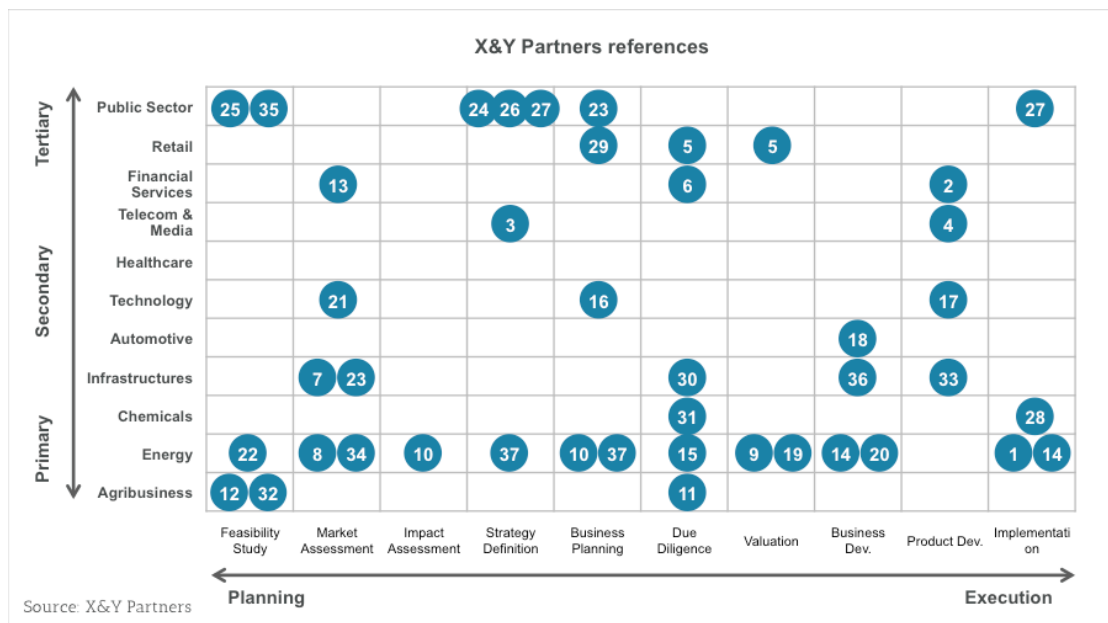


Exhibit 6 – An example of how visual representations can also be used to highlight qualitative information

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Instead of saying...	... consider saying instead:
For the Middle East, renewable energies represent a huge opportunity to meet the expected increase in electricity demand	For the Middle East, renewable energies represent an opportunity to meet the expected increase in electricity demand
Overcapacity caused p-Si and PVX prices to plummet in 2012, but prices are now expected to plateau or even slightly increase	Overcapacity caused polysilicon and solar module spot prices to plummet in 2012, but prices are now expected to plateau or even slightly increase
The increasing demand for decision-making tools and the evolution of social software should result in stronger Porter forces in the near future	The increasing demand for decision-making tools and the evolution of social software should result in additional competitors in the near future
Our solution will be accessible trough web and mobile versions, and will be based on an existing WDF	Our solution will be accessible trough web and mobile versions, and will be based on an existing Web Development Framework (WDF)

Source: X&Y Partners

Exhibit 7 – Examples on how to eliminate superfluous adjectives, industry lingo, buzzwords and acronyms

assignment types.

8. Leave out the superfluous adjectives

Unless you are working on a marketing pitch or sales brochure, do not use any more adjectives than you have to. In particular, fervent

adjectives like “extremely”, “huge” or “incredible” are seldom required and can make your text look less credible: let your opinions and facts do the talking. Also leave out any buzzwords, clichés and industry lingo (if you really need to use acronyms or very specific terms, define them first). Exhibit 7 provides a few good and bad

Source: X&Y Partners

Exhibit 8 – A template and attention to detail will transform untidy diagrams (top row) in professional looking visual aids (bottom row)

examples from our own experience.

9. Obsess over details

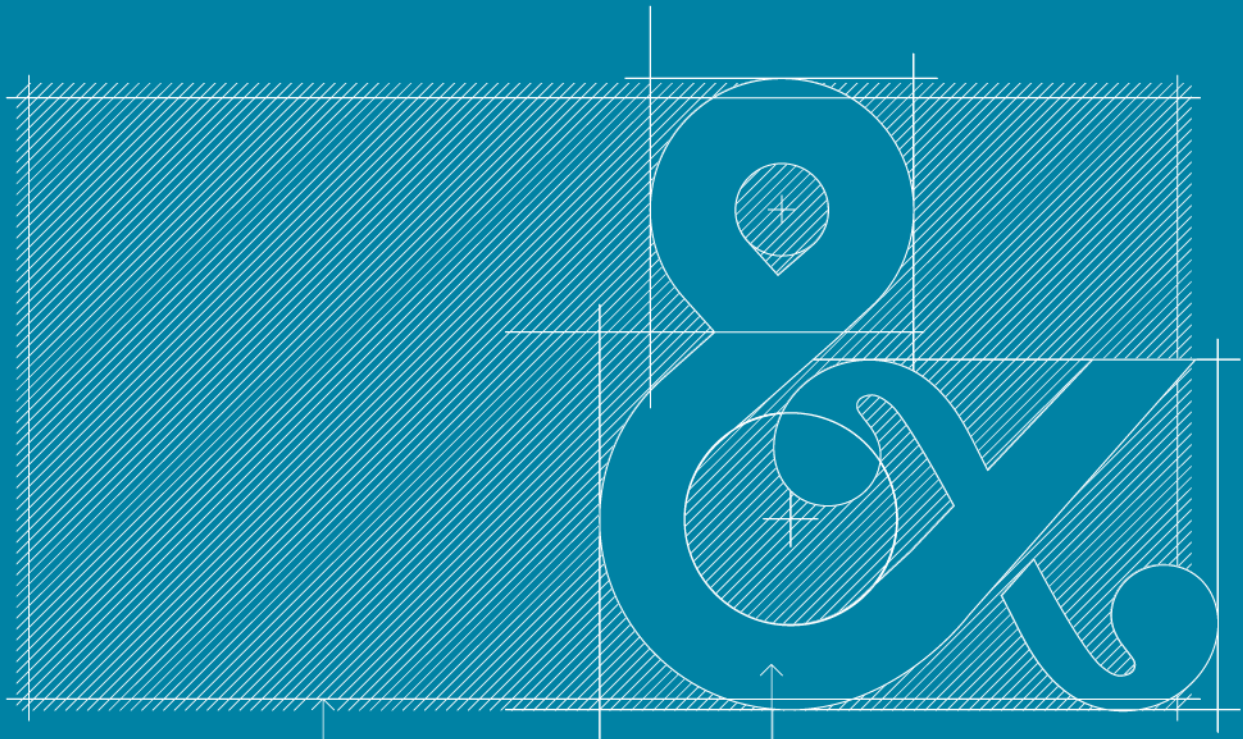
Even the strongest content can be ruined by a hasty execution. If you expect your audience to invest their time in reading what you wrote, you first need to invest your own time in ensuring that every little detail has been taken care of: constantly reread what you wrote to make sure you are maintaining a consistent flow and tone; rewrite sentences as many times as necessary to get them right; eliminate misspells and typos.

The graphical aspects of business content are equally important: make sure you use the same formats, fonts

and colors throughout the entire document. Using a template (or developing your own) will simplify this process and offer your reader a familiar and easy to follow structure (Exhibit 8).

10. Ask for feedback and revise accordingly

Asking for feedback (a topic we address [here](#)) is our final recommendation on business writing: encourage your readers to comment, learn from the resulting discussion, and revise your text accordingly.



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